An Analysis of the poem “Upside-Down” by Alexander Kushner

The poem “Upside-Down” is a humorous poem by Alexander Kushner who has published 15 collections of poetry as well as two prose works. He is also known as one of the best lyrical poets of the 20th century.

The central character of the poem is an eccentric person called “Upside-Down”. As the name suggests, he acts in a very absurd manner, making everything upside down.

The poem contains some of his ‘upside-down’ acts which naturally evokes humour. No one could make him understand the reality and act in a rational manner. (“All his life he was afraid to cross a bridge). Sometimes he is depicted as being very unsure of himself and his abilities:

“Shall I read it…p’raps I can’t.”

Due to his crazy deeds, Upside-Down has become a laughing stock in his society. He also appears to be a social ‘misfit’ or one who does not fit into the society although he is not an anti-social character.

Even though the poet presents Upside-Down as an absurd and eccentric character, he also appears to sympathise with him to a certain extent. In other words, he also conveys a sense of loneliness or alienation caused by Upside-Down’s inability to conform to the social norms.

The last two lines of the poem seem to suggest that unless one conforms to society, he will not be accepted or recognized by the society:

‘You must behave as others do

If they’re to have respect for you’

The two lines, however, seem to be ambigous in that the poet may be giving an advice or he may be ironical of his advice. In other words, if a person does not follow the social norms and behave ‘as others do’ he will not be accepted by the society as the society always looks askance at anything which is unconventional even if it is something positive.

The poem has a simple rhyme scheme and an easy-moving rhythm which befits its light-hearted tone.The use of direct speech at certain places also makes the poem interesting. The humour arises mainly from the unpredictability and the absurdity of Upside-Down’s behaviour.